

Philippe Raphanel: 'Inauthentic' Appearance and the Regional Landscape Tradition

The beliefs sustaining landscape painting in Canada and British Columbia certainly merit an examination beyond the commonplace of a valorizing regionalism.(1) We know that the often epiphanic 'landscapes' of the regional modernists are asserting and affirming something, but it is only dialectical to ask what it is they are simultaneously negating. Landscape painting in British Columbia stands for, among other things, the negation of abstraction and the ultimate failure of international high culture to establish itself here--except in parodic and pastoral forms.

The regional landscape 'tradition' has been called upon to serve various narratives of history and place. For example, the tradition has been fairly consistent in conflating First Nations peoples with 'nature' and, have connived in constructing an highly energized 'pastoral' home for the colonizing/colonized culture while resisting the realities of an industrialized 'nature'. As purely cultural objects, signs of wealth, confidence and 'belonging', the resulting paintings serve to establish the reflection of indigenous' high modernist culture at the frontier. These paintings are enmeshed in a discourse of conquest and consolidation, and, despite the subject-matter which localizes them, the paintings are fundamentally empty of anything except the remnants of painting. Dependent on their relation to an international, European idea of the realization of a sense of place through painted depictions of the landscape, these paintings actually serve to hinder, rather than actualize, a shared consciousness of place and its economies.

The luxurious surface of oil painting is the site where cultural value is assessed and determined; the subject of the representation is 'unimportant'. (2) The nuances of brush-work paradoxically 'express' individuality and the generality of 'expression' itself. Therefore, whatever and artist intends to 'express' by the subject or manner of application is muffled by the surface of the work, because that surface is so primarily an economic sign. In this context, 'landscape', far

from declaring the confidence of capturing something about a motif or a mood becomes just that very mood and motif which dismisses the modernist project for an indigenous but ersatz modernism. Landscape painting in BC represents the triumph of illusions over realities, and is really the result of conservative market forces which demand signs of reassurance and self-recognition. The illusions of continuity served by the practice mask a whole series of colonialist anxieties that appear in the traditions two, related modes. Greyed-out scenes of mist, rain and islands speak of ennui, boredom and melancholy introspection. In such pictures, the landscape has mystical and poetic properties which induce nostalgia for various colonial pasts and entrepreneurial futures through a synthesis of European and Asian techniques of representation. In the other mode, nature-based abstraction documents the search for 'roots' in nature and in 'natural' culture through metaphors of sexual domination and submission. This mode depends on an essentialist identification of the artist's body with 'nature'. Yet this identification--anti-social and anarchic--never appears in paintings that, after all, never represent bodies. Instead, the painting as body, as nature, is enacted through a series of modernist, unresolved and irreconcilable imperatives. Between abstraction and representation, 'universal' nature and localized place, industrial and pastoral landscape, identities are proposed in order to negotiate the reigning contradiction of colonized and colonizer. These identities, which cannot truly realize themselves without a profound change in the society, are temporary shelters against the brutality of an entrepreneurial culture based in resource extraction. Thus, the painting, in both modes, uses metaphors of mutilation and presents disorienting points of view.

II

Philippe Raphanel studied at the École nationale supérieure des arts appliqués et métiers d'arts in his native Paris between 1974 and 1978. The school prepared students for careers in applied art and interior design. By his own account, Raphanel got little from the school; the teachers were cynically conservative, nursing the lost illusions of the failed almost-revolution of May '68 or else

gloating over the re-affirmation of the status quo in the early seventies. Raphanel characterizes the painting instructors as “late followers of Nicolas de Staël,” ignorant of post-war American painting and the European avant-garde of the sixties and early seventies.(3) At this “boring,” reactionary institution, Raphanel spent most of his time with his fellow, equally discontent students. His notions of painting and what it offered him were naïve--perhaps. As a child, he loved the works of Delacroix in the Louvre, moving on as a teenager to the Impressionists and Van Gogh, and, later, he came to regard Matisse and Bonnard as the epicentre of twentieth-century art. He read the French romantics, Chateaubriand, Stendahl, et al., and the more modern Sartre and Ionesco. Living at the centre of ‘civilization’, but unaware of recent art history, Raphanel constructed his idea of “the solitary artist . . . with his soul, his omnipotence, his pride, his patience and his destiny.”(4)

In 1976, at twenty and midway through his diploma, he travelled to Canada for the first time. His friend Jane Stanier’s parents, microbiologists at the Pasteur Institute, took him to Hornby Island, BC, for the summer. Hornby must have been a strange introduction to North America, as the island possesses an intense counter-modern culture, distinguished by its now-‘canonized’ hand-built architecture and anti-development ethic. Well-known Canadian artists--Jack and Doris Shadbolt, Jerry Pethick, Tom Burrows, Wayne Ngan, Gordon Payne, et al.--either live or spend the summer there. He met the Shadbolts and, though Jack withheld his encouragement till later, Doris was curious about, and supportive of the young man from Paris who wanted to become a painter. On a trip to the Vancouver Art Gallery, he saw Emily Carr’s paintings, finding them “austere”, dark, forboding and gloomy--“not like a Bonnard, but like Hornby.” His first involvement with Carr was indifferent and had no immediate effect, but, as the present exhibition attests, her example was to become critical to his later development.

Raphanel again travelled to Hornby in 1977 and, in 1978, he moved there after graduating from the École, drawn by the motif--so he thought--of unspoiled nature. After four months, he went to Vancouver, a city which loathes both urbanity and nature, and Raphanel quickly fled southward to San Francisco and Mexico. After a year, he returned to Vancouver still convinced that the

'wilderness' landscape offered what he wanted as a person and as an artist. Back in Vancouver, however, he gravitated towards the polymorphous post-punk scene around the Pitt Gallery on Pender, a focal point for musicians, artists and writers who felt betrayed by the preceding modernist generation. Previously connected to the Vancouver School of Art, but 'abandoned' when the school left the urban core for the yuppie theme-park of Granville Island, the Pitt stood its ground, showing art that had to do with urban reality.

Raphanel's first exhibition at the Pitt was in 1983. He had decided to take urban ugliness, especially the ugliness of the derelict, dispossessed *lumpenproletariat*, as his true subject. In these Dubuffet-like, punk paintings, horrid clown faces spew spittle through the void. They were meant as lamentations for the meaninglessness of modern life, the impossibility of communication. Possibly they had their source in Raphanel's own sense of alienation, exacerbated by living in a foreign culture. But, with his Cordova Street studio across from a mission where the line-ups for food grew longer throughout the eighties recession, "*les gens de la rue*" were his neighbours. This was what the Gauguin-like move to someplace "unspoiled" had come to: living right where the mill makes its grist, among the human waste-products of the resource industry.

Around this time, Raphanel met Vicki Marshall, another young painter who had shown at the Pitt. Her works were a local version of Berlin neo-expressionism. Her street scenes with prostitutes or strippers in bars presented urban night-life as the decrepit stage for scenarios of sexual exploitation and violence. They also had the excitement and menace of a punk 'critique' which paradoxically embraced what it rejected. Bright, 'intoxicated' colours, skewed points of view and animated brush-work 'energized' situations which otherwise spoke of despair, loneliness and utter ennui. Raphanel's next series were partly stimulated by Marshall's example. Preparing a textured surface with sawdust, Raphanel painted his own, somewhat bemused version of the urban inferno using vertigo-inducing perspective. These were shown at the Kenneth G. Heffel Gallery in 1984. Yet the move from downtown to uptown, which might have indicated a sudden rise in fortune, was premature. Not a single work was sold, although the Heffel show did lead to Raphanel being included in a touring exhibition of recent Canadian figurative painting.

Raphanel's next series returned him to the concern with 'nature' that had brought him to the west coast. By now the spell of Hornby had dissipated, as his first vision of a beautiful 'wilderness' had been tempered by the abundant evidence--which one cannot avoid en route to Hornby up the east coast of Vancouver Island--of a highly industrial landscape. The paintings of logging trucks, biomorphic hulks of machinery and sleeping workmen, owed something to the work of Enzo Cucchi. They were about bodies as well as the ravages of the forest industry. It is easy to read the logs as phallic forms, albeit dismembered ones, and the vitalist anxiety of these paintings depends on this bodily, sexual reference. He exhibited these works in the "Young Romantics" exhibition I curated at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1985. Unfortunately titled during a momentary enslavement to the marketing mentality that dominated the gallery after its move to the old Courthouse in 1983, the response to the exhibition established Raphanel and the others as new, young Vancouver painters.

The situation for painting in Vancouver looked good in the mid-eighties. A new generation--inspired by the international success of neo-expressionism, trans-avant-gardism and 'new' expressive figure and landscape painting--gained attention and notoriety. While the zenith of the movement was the 1982 "*Zeitgeist*" exhibition in Berlin, by the mid-eighties there were signs of collapse. The movement was heavily criticized in the serious art press as a market-driven, essentially reactionary phenomenon, and many of the international stars lost their edge and produced toned-down pastiches of their earlier work.

The Vancouver painters were criticized for being derivative and too-distant from the mainly European and American discourses around painting to be 'authentic' practitioners. In retrospect, some of the local criticism of the "Young Romantics" had as its basis the perception that the artists had deviated from, or abandoned, the local, regional tradition of modernist landscape.⁽⁵⁾ Exemplified by Carr and Shadbolt, and their anti-heroic counterparts Al Neil and Bill Bissett, this is the tradition of expressionist, nature-based painting which combines modernist ideals with regional imperatives. However, shortly after the "Young Romantics," Raphanel and

Marshall began to be identified with this tradition, and the Diane Farris Gallery, where both artists have shown regularly since 1985, has promoted the identification.

In 1986, after visiting Marshall while she was painting landscapes in the Slocan Valley, Raphanel began a series of 'mine' paintings. These continues the theme of the industrial landscape and the anxious body; the interior of mine shaft could also be read as corporeal interiors. Like the 'punk' works , these were views constructed to unbalance. In 1987, Raphanel began working more frequently at Hornby, making drawings and paintings based on the island forests and views of Georgia Strait. It was in these works that the influence of Emily Carr began to be seen, as Raphanel exaggerated the sexual metaphors of her gothic forest byways and vibrating skies. Raphanel appeared headed for a solid career as an expressionist landscape painter. His earlier concern for states of anxiety and alienation and bodily metaphors could still be read in the paintings, but the question of the continuity of the regional tradition he worked in had made its intrusion.

III

Just as Raphanel secured his voice within the local landscape tradition, he began to depart from its norms. The present exhibition, *Lip Synch*, is the current culmination of tendencies apparent in the work for several years. The first thing to go was oil paint, thus holding the illusion-hungry market forces at bay. In 1990, he exhibited a large, multi-panel work, *Panorama*, which consisted of drawings given a monochrome tint. This work indicated both an increasing concern for drawing and with the presentation of the drawings as objects as well as 'pictures'.

Many of the recent drawings attempt to dissolve the substantiality of form and warp the traditional recession of pictorial space by means of sinuous bundles of vectors that energize space much in the way Carr energized her vibrating skies . The result is often aggressive, tense and manic. Carr's skies were passages in which she celebrated the spiritual forces she thought animated nature. They are places of disembodied energy, places of release, freedom and sublimation. Raphanel's are palpable, heavy, violent and frightening. In a way, they are twisted material of

cultural, rather than 'natural' energy. *Sky Drawing*, a large, multi-panel work from 1990, is as apocalyptic as a catastrophe by the Victorian sensationalist, "mad" John Martin.

In *Lip Synch*, Raphanel has incorporated drawing in an installation. A large diptych is divided by a coffin-size, wooden 'box' propped against the wall. The box contains sound: a montage of recorded music turned into 'noise'. The diptych is more a large drawing on canvas than a painting. On the bottom is a landscape vista, the sort of island/water view one might see looking south from Hornby. These passages remind me very much of Carr's oil on paper sketches of the view across the Straits of Juan de Fuca. But, looming in the 'sky' is a mesmerizing abstraction, a world of forms that constitutes another universe. Pictorial space is warped, as in the earlier drawings, by filaments of energy. The forms in the 'sky' also relate to Carr. In the left-hand panel, a large passage is given over to what appears to a citation from her *Forest Interior* (circa 1931), where she portrayed hanging cedar branches as heavy, velvet theatre curtains. There is a vague suggestion, too, of the ovoid forms of the carving and painting traditions of the Northwest Coast First Nations peoples. The diptych is almost a 'face', split down the middle by the ominous wooden box.

The other elements of *Lip Synch* are circular pastel on canvas works titled *Echo*. These are hung in a corner, 'facing' each other. *Echo* recapitulated the abstract forms found in the diptych, but, drawn in rich pinks and oranges, these refer more immediately to the interior of the body: its organs, orifices and cavities. The title would indicate that it is the ear, organ of hearing and balance, which is the privileged reference.

The decision to use pastel (or, rather, misuse it, for it is normally applied to paper) and the related decision to concentrate on the expressive possibilities of the surface, were taken in light of a 1989 visit to the extensive collection of Watteau in the Schloß Charlottenberg in Berlin. The Watteau paintings, in this context, are almost admonitory, as they stand for the abandoned ideas of the German Enlightenment and the court of Friedrich the Great and his honored guest, Voltaire. The Schloß is largely a replica/restoration, and no modern person can enter the building and look at Watteau without realizing, with great discomfort, that we have yet to sort out the forces that

destroyed the Schlöss from those which built it. The paintings themselves are about what it would be like to live in a completely 'natural', 'pastoralized' world; it is an impulse which appears in exaggerated, distorted form in a place like British Columbia, where the 'natural' and 'pastoral' are in constant and violent antagonism. The Watteau references in Raphanel are politicized ones for me; for Raphanel, they also cue his project to have his work "come out of my body" and "project my sexuality into the work."

Although the subject matter of *Lip Synch* is nature and the body (at least these are what the depicted forms suggest), the title of the work refers to language, technology and mass culture, representation and illusion. Aural aspects of the piece, in the titles and the actual sound component, disrupt the regime of the visual in which 'painting' could be expected to exert authority. *Lip Synch* acknowledges the condition of its own crisis in a way Raphanel's earlier production hinted at but did not declare, and, while the intensity of what the artist means by sexualized imagery has increased, so has the disruption and doubt that frames representation.

A lip synch is a fraudulent representation. In Raphanel's friend, Stan Douglas' work "Mime," the second part of *Deux devises* (1982/83), Douglas used slide-projected images of his mouth and 'synched' these to a blues song. That the fit was awkward was the point, as the awkwardness marked the very disruption that Douglas wanted to explore as a negative, politicized space for the disappearance of identity and its "expression". *Lip Synch* attempts something similar, posing as awkward and incomplete while at the same time expanding its materials and technologies to do so. The sound is garbled. An echo is a short circuit in communication. You speak out, and you, or the "you" the world reflects, answers back. The phenomenon is mythologized as an aspect of narcissism, but is also part of mastery over nature.

In the realm of the natural, there are, according to Hannah Arendt, both "authentic" and "inauthentic" appearances. Authentic appearances "come to light of their own accord and 'inauthentic' ones, such as the roots of plants or the inner organs of an animal, . . . become visible only through interference with and violation of the 'authentic' appearance."(6) Individuation is a phenomenon of authentic appearance; inauthentic appearances, like inner organs--unless marked by

disease or deformity--are alike. Feelings, passions and emotions belong to the inner life that "can no more become part and parcel of the world of appearance than can our inner organs." Every 'display' of emotion "contains a reflection upon it, and it is this reflection that gives the emotion the highly individualized form which is meaningful for all surface phenomenon." (7) For Arendt, the psyche is a bodily sensation, and modern psychology relies on the idea the "inside we are all alike," just as "physiology and medicine relies on the sameness of our inner organs." (8) If our passions and emotions can only appear 'inauthentically', then it is only deviation, abnormality and disorder which can be reflected in 'authentic' appearances. The inauthentic becomes the vehicle for the realization of self, because any representation is an authentic appearance, even if it is a representation of a phenomenon of inauthentic appearance.

Raphanel's paintings, so clearly an attempt to express inner psychic life and 'sexuality', turn the body inside-out in order to confront a crisis of inauthentic appearance. There is certainly something of this in Carr and much of it in Shadbolt. This somatic crisis, where the revelation of inner' depth is tantamount to the loss of individual identity, is, in landscape painting, reflected in an industrialized territory which itself is being rendered as inauthentic. Carr loved painting the unnatural; roots and stumps nourished her taste for rot and ruination, a taste she used to negotiate and measure the unjust reality of the society she finally chose to try and decipher. Carr spoke a theological language in a society that still reserved afternoons in the parlour for such talk. Post-war artists have more understanding of the abstract, economic forces that pry open the inauthentic so violently in nature. The sexual metaphors they use to understand the mass destruction of local ecological systems and life-forms is sexual in the German expressionist sense. That is, in the sense that rape becomes the reigning metaphor for the appearance of inauthentic experience and, therefore, the very fount of art and 'expression'.

Raphanel's new works are enmeshed in these problematic and long-standing 'traditions' of landscape painting and the representation of nature. I think he is both seduced by, and resists, the tradition as a way to think about place, painting and sexual identity. His body and 'nature' are not just the representational subject-matter of the work; they are things which themselves depend upon

painting in order to appear. The regional painting tradition contaminates nature, pollutes and poisons all appearances with the anxiety of the parlour and the living-room. This anxiety is enshrined in the museum and gallery. These are spaces for special perversions, houses for reified and frozen representations that harass their publics with high calls to the "living culture."

Raphanel's new works are attempts at self-description. Their honesty is compelling as is their appeal for disruptive and new representations. Desire for penetration, regarded as 'unnatural' in a man, animates his drawings and is the source of their somewhat shocking pleasure and beauty. The surfaces of *Echo* have been 'massaged' and the pastels pressed into the surface. The whole shimmering orifice is vibrating in anxious anticipation of touch and violation. The installation/paintings present themselves as appearances rescued from inauthentic appearance: the asshole as culturally unexplored territory as mysterious to us as the canals of Mars of the Atlantic trenches. Or, as unexplored as the idea that what lives should [what: live??] Raphanel's works continue the project of the demonization of nature within the regional trope of sexual violation and submissiveness, but they do so with a view to identifying himself with the violated. This view, very poetic in the work, is a radical position. It challenges the patriarchally formed male to bend over and get fucked, and then maybe we will get the picture.

Scott Watson

1. See Robert Linsley, "Painting and the Social History of British Columbia," in *The Vancouver Anthology* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, forthcoming), and this writer's "Disfiguring Nature: The Origins of the Modern Canadian Landscape," in *The Eye of Nature* (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, forthcoming), for recent challenges to traditional readings of the landscape tradition and its subject in Canada.
2. Oil painting, however, is actually at the margins of the practice, deferred to and negotiated around. Watercolour and acrylic have been the preferred media, not challenged until the younger painters took up oils again in the eighties.
3. Quoted from conversations with the artist in preparation for this essay, April, 1991.
4. This characterization of the formation of the marginalized artist is Louise Bourgeois's. The complete quote reads: "The solitary artist is going to be a thing of the past, with his soul, his omnipotence, his pride, his patience and his destiny." See Parkett 27 (1991), 45.
5. For the best example, see Roy Arden "[I don't have the reference]," *Vanguard* XV:2 (September 1985?), ??-??
6. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 28.

7. Arendt, 31.

8. Arendt, 35.

Acknowledgements

The Or Gallery is pleased to present *Lip Synch*, an installation of new work by Philippe Raphanel. I would like to thank the artist for his considered work, Scott Watson for his incisive essay, Doug Munday for his catalogue design, and Stan Douglas and Jim Jardine for the photography. As well, I would like to thank the Diane Farris Gallery for their contribution to the exhibition, and the City of Vancouver, The Province of British Columbia through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, Recreation and Culture, and The Canada Council for their continued support of Or Gallery programming. Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to welcome Susan Schuppli as my successor at the Or, and thank her for her contribution to many aspects of this exhibition.

Nancy Shaw

Director, Or Gallery

I would like to express my appreciation to the following individuals: Nancy Shaw for overseeing the exhibit; Scott Watson for writing the essay; Ewan McNeil for his help with the installation, ~~Stan Douglas and Jim Jardine for photography~~. As well I want to thank Keith Wallace for his support, and give special thanks to Marcel and Genviève Raphanel.

Philippe Raphanel

ISBN 1-895005-02-7

Copyright c Scott Watson and the Or Gallery, 1991

Or Gallery